Diamond Cut Diamond

By JANE BUNKER

STRANGE BEHAVIOR OF THE EXTRAVAGANT SLIPPERS.

Synopsis.—While in the little French town of Vevay, where the "staid, proper spinster" who tells the story is spending a vacation, she is asked to allow a young girl, Claire de Ravenol, to be her companion back to the United States. Although forming an attachment to the girl, the heroine takes a dislike to Monsieur de Ravenol, Claire's father, and declines. On the boat she finds Claire in the care of a casual acquaintance, Mrs. Delario, whom she had met while each was purchasing a pair of slippers, exactly alike, which figure largely in subsequent events.

CHAPTER II—Continued.

—2—

Well, of course, I hadn't meant anything so serious as that when I spoke, but seeing that she was very much in earnest I let it pass and told her the story of the ring. It is a pleasantly romantic tale, the curious escapes from perils and sudden deaths coincident to the ring's possession giving you the feeling that it's lucky.

Mrs. Delario listened, and when I had finished she burst out, "I'm mad over gems—simply mad! It's been the dream of my life to own them in handfuls. You can't imagine the influence they have over me. I could sing—I could dance. They thrill me through and through. People don't generally think it, but gems are alive."

We had some discussion on this, rather flippant on my part, and it was this incident that started us talking gems and gem values, a subject that had been my pet delight since childhood when I learned the story of the ring that was one day to be my own. A few days later she came to my stateroom with a very mysterious air, said she had some stones she would like to have me value for her, and produced a package of topazes. She said she had bought them in a little town in Belgium.

I ran them through my hands, held a few to the light and in less than sixty seconds told her they were worth from ninety cents to a dollar apiece.

She was in high feather over it, saying she'd paid only a franc each for them. She next asked me to appraise the diamonds in a ring she wore. I gave her the value of the stones and the probable price that had been paid for it. She appeared so much impressed by my knowledge that she flatteringly said as she rose to leave me, "I'll know where to come if I ever need expert opinion on stones—and I may some day."

I didn't think anything of this at the time—people always say it to me out of politeness—and I no more expected her to call on me as a gem expert than I looked for her to call me as a physician or a lawyer or anything that I professionally wasn't. She knew I was a writer, for I was pegging away at "Belgian Byways" as hard as ever I could to get it ready in time for Blank's magazine—so much that I had to tell Claire frankly she mustn't bother me while I was working. I remember that I was quite sharp to her one morning, saying I should not be able to go out on deck with her till afternoon, and after she had left me, looking rather sad, I had to rush to my stateroom for my forgotten penknife, and there was Claire.

I confess it surprised me to see her there without invitation, but she excused it by saying that she thought I wouldn't mind—she'd grown so tired of her own stateroom and Mrs. Delario was always talking about people she didn't know—and wouldn't I, just out of pity, let her lie in my berth a while?

My suitcase was open in the berth. I took it out and stowed it; and then just out of pity I laid Claire down in its place and stayed with her. That one trifling act probably changed the course of my life; but I'm telling the story as it unwound its length and coiled its entangling meshes over the straight and narrow path my feet were treading.

It was because of our common interest in Claire that I saw a great deal more of Mrs. Delario that I otherwise should have done. It was on the last day out that she first mentioned her own children to me, saying that one reason why she'd been willing to take the responsibility of Claire was that she was so like her Lila, a girl of thirteen in a boarding school; and from Lila she went on to Eugene, who couldn't meet her at the steamer, unfortunately, because she'd come back two weeks early and he was in the West.

He seemed very near her heart, and after talking of him for half an hour she either warmed to it or let slip by accident, I couldn't tell which, the words, "It's the grief of my life—and of his, poor boy—that he detests my profession so. But what can I do?"

"Your profession! What is your profession?" I exclaimed, thrown quite out of my customary reserve in asking personal questions.

I thought she looked at me in a queer way, and I saw she hesitated to answer. I was on the point of apologizing for my inquisitiveness when she startled me by replying, "I'm a clairvoyant."

I was thrown off my reserve still more and couldn't help echoing, "A clairvoyant!" in actual astonishment, she was so different from what I'd have expected to find under the name. She added quickly, "I saw you didn't approve of—didn't believe in the occult the day we talked about your ring—and I've been at pains not to—not to bore you with talking shop, there are so many other interesting things that we have in common."

I didn't want her to feel uncomfortable and laughed to reassure her, "Oh, I'm not 'sot ag'in it'—to tell you the truth, I don't know a blessed thing about it, except what one picks up in the papers, and of course—"

She fairly took the words out of my mouth that I was at the moment trying to keep in—"Of course one gets prejudiced and looks on that sort of thing as—all fraud." There were both anger and a twinkle in her eye, as though she knew she'd caught me in the act, and then she added: "It's partly what I went over for—to look up some new mediums with a view to having them come to New York and give seances."

And from this she went on and described some of the phenomena she'd actually seen with her own eyes. For instance, a little peasant boy in the south of France—where, she left me to guess, and I fancied she didn't like to trust me with the secret—Jacques Lerolls, "whose phenomena were more wonderful than Eurapia Palladino's." He was a physical manifestation medium. He "was greater at ten years of age than Slade."

Still even Jacques Lerolls wasn't so wonderful as a young girl in Paris—she brought stones covered with dripping seaweeds out of the bottom of the ocean, and she had once brought a live bird into a locked room during a seance and had put it—after it had fluttered all about and everybody saw it—into a closed cage—"dematerialized it twice in one evening," said Mrs. Delario. This girl had only just begun to develop materialization as one of her phases.

I confess it struck me as Mrs. Delario talked and told me how she'd been trying to make arrangements for one of these persons to come over with her that she was getting up new turns in her own shows much as a vaudeville manager hunts up new performers for his. She asked me to visit her in New York, not professionally but as a friend, and still, if I were interested and would undertake some investigations, she'd be glad to help me, and I couldn't refrain from saying, "That is, you'll put me next to some first-class spooks?"

I think this rather hurt her, for she answered a little tartly, "You may not be interested now—but you will be. The occult is coming into your life and you can't prevent it. You'll get manifestations that will—at least that may—drive you almost insane if you're not prepared for them and don't know how to handle the forces that are already at work about you." And with that parting shot—that, of course, anybody might fire into you in self-defense or just to be a little nasty—she went away to Claire. And I'm going to confess right here that in spite of my skepticism I felt creepy.

I also felt clearer in my own mind on many little things I'd noticed about Claire: her coming to my stateroom that time; her constant hanging about me, even when she must have seen it was inconvenient for me to have her; and the way she seemed so much of the latter part of the voyage to be trying to keep away from Mrs. Delario, staying by herself in her stateroom. Had there been manifestations occurring in the stateroom? Or had Mrs. Delario been telling Claire things till she got the child so nervous the doctor was really serious over her?

Mrs. Delario was not at dinner that night and Claire left the table after the soup, and as I was busy packing I saw neither of them until morning, when all was bustle and excitement, for we'd passed the Statue of Liberty and were steaming up the bay and would be on dry land almost before we knew it. And then we were hanging over the rail and looking down at the friends of the passengers on the dock, and I heard Claire, in an agonized voice: "Mamma isn't meeting me!"

Claire began to cry, not boisterously but in a dreadfully pathetic, lost-child way, into a very beautiful French embroidered handkerchief and all the customs inspectors gathered about her and she asked them each in turn if he'd seen mamma and described mamma, and he shook his head and told her he'd help her look for mamma in a minute as soon as he got the baggage inspected; and Mrs. Delario and I got our suitcases opened and made Claire open her bags and her trunk and we implored the inspectors to look at our meager belongings in a hurry and the inspectors were all too busy asking Claire what her mother looked like and what hotel she stayed at; and Claire would use her exquisite handkerchief on her more exquisite eyes and say she supposed it was Hotel d'Angleterre—they always stopped at d'Angleterres when they traveled. Finally I managed to induce an inspector to take his eyes off Claire for a minute and devote them to the baggage of a middle-aged person—myself—and he cast a glance over my suitcase and Mrs. Delario's, which was open on a bench beside mine, and said, "That's all right. Where does the young lady come from, and isn't it awful her mother isn't here, and maybe she's met with an accident on the way and been killed."

Claire heard him—and almost fainted into Mrs. Delario's arms.

Now just a moment before he said these words I noticed that one of the two pairs of turquoise-studded slippers had fallen between the two suitcases. I picked it up and I was on the point of asking Mrs. Delario if it belonged to her when Claire collapsed, and three seconds later I saw my cousin, who should have met me, coming up on the trot.

He made the first sensible suggestion that had been offered—that as Mrs. Delario had Claire in charge she'd better take the child home with her and cable to the father for instructions.

The slipper was all this while in my hand, and without giving it another thought—indeed, hardly being conscious what I did—I stuffed it in among some clothes in my own suitcase and shut the lid and away we went. Wasn't it, under the circumstances, a perfectly natural thing to do? Well, the moral is "don't"—don't ever carry off an old slipper unless you're sure it's yours. That old slipper nearly cost me my sanity and my life!

Now, when I unpacked I found the slipper, but even then it didn't occur to me that it wasn't mine—I merely wondered how I'd lost the mate, and it was a couple of days before I got to the bottom of the other suitcase and found my own pair neatly done up in tissue paper. Of course I knew instantly that the old slipper was Mrs. Delario's, and remembered then how I'd carried it off; but I didn't have a box suitable for sending it through the mail to her, so I set it on a chest where I'd be sure to see it and not let it get mixed with mine, meaning to take it down to the house as soon as I could find time for it. And thus several more days went by, and I forgot the slipper and that Mrs. Jimmson was coming to clean. I somehow assumed that Mrs. Jimmson had sense enough to see it was an odd slipper and leave it on the chest where she found it, but you never can tell what anybody will do—perhaps she'd have done just the same if I'd told her not to: for she mixed those slippers up and set them in a row beside my bed along with oxford ties and bath slippers.

It was on the day that Mrs. Jimmson cleaned that Claire came tripping up to see me and tell me that her father had arrived.

It was the first time I'd seen her since we'd parted at the cable office, and of course I had to spare her a few minutes and hear what she had to say. She was staying with her father at a hotel—mamma hadn't yet come, because grandpapa was dying every day and she didn't dare to leave him. And then she suddenly wished to know if all Americans lived the way Mrs. Delario did, and did American ladies work?

I had to ask her what she meant, and she explained that everything at Mrs. Delario's was "so unlike the way they lived abroad;" that Mrs. Delario never left her bedroom unlocked for a single minute; that all the upstairs rooms were locked; that she made her—Claire—keep her door locked "because," she said, "you never can tell;" that people, most of whom were strangers, were coming to the house all day from nine till five. Mrs. Delario called them "sitters" and gave them "readings" in an awfully queer room where the shutters weren't ever opened; and she—Claire—believed that Mrs. Delario took money for these readings, though she never would say what she read; and if she took money how could she be a lady? Though she was very nice and kind and papa wanted her to keep her—Claire—till her mother arrived, and Mrs. Delario wouldn't on account of her work, and what sort of work could it possibly be?

I saw by that that Mrs. Delario hadn't taken Claire much into her confidence—Claire said even her father couldn't guess what Mrs. Delario did, exactly, though he thought he knew a little, only he didn't know that ladies did it in America.

While I was considering what I'd better say the clock struck and I bounced out of my chair in a hurry—it was the hour of an appointment, and here I was five miles away, gossiping.

I told Claire I had to run, and she followed me to my bedroom while I got my coat, and it was she who exclaimed, "Why, there's Mrs. Delario's slipper! She's hunted everywhere for it. You picked it up at the customs house and put it in your suitcase."

"I'm the thief," I laughed, slipping on my coat.

Claire took a couple of steps toward the slippers and said, "I'll take it back to her."

"No, my dear—just leave it. I don't know which is hers—I see Mrs. Jimmson has mixed them all up—and I haven't time to find out now."

"Oh, I can soon tell," and Claire was about to pounce on them, but I headed her off.

"That's a matter for me to attend to, Claire, and entirely between Mrs. Delario and myself."

By this time I had on my veil and gloves, and hearing the elevator stopping at the floor, I shooed Claire and bolted for it.

Now I'd looked at the slippers as Claire spoke, and they were standing HEEL TO THE WALL, between a pair of oxford ties and a pair of bath slippers that were toe to the wall, as were all the rest but these three slippers; and I noticed this particularly and remembered it later coming home in the cars when the incident recurred to me, and I wondered why—since Claire was no longer with Mrs. Delario—she had been so anxious to take the slipper back, and if she needed an excuse—possibly—to her father for going to the house to see her friend, and how if it hadn't been for Mrs. Jimmson I could have let her take the slipper and been glad to have her do it; and how Mrs. Jimmson must have pleased herself in placing the slippers just that way, backs to the wall, so they'd show off to best advantage as works of art and decorate the room at large with their beauty; and how it must have puzzled her to find three slippers all alike in my room—not two, not four, but three; and why three? And what would the good creature say if I told her I'd stolen the odd one?

These thoughts may seem too trivial to mention, but the point is that I thought them and they were so obviously suggested by the way Jimmson placed the slippers, heel to the wall. But here's the uncanny thing that happened: When I got home one hour after seeing them that way and turned on the light my eyes fell upon the slippers—THEY WERE ALL TOEING THE WALL.

It gave me such a shock that I sat flop down on the bed. So far as I knew not a human soul had entered during my absence of one hour and some minutes, nor was there any evidence that anything else in the place had been touched—the other shoes stood toe to the wall just as I'd seen them when I went out with Claire.

The spinster sees some "rubies" that surprise her.

(TO BE CONTINUED.)

England's "Mad Poet."

The name "Mad Poet" was applied to Nathaniel Lee, an English dramatist who was born in Hatfield in 1663. He was the son of a Presbyterian minister of Hertfordshire who conformed to the Reformation. He was educated at Westminster school and Trinity college, Cambridge. For a time he was on the stage, but later devoted himself to writing tragedies, of which he produced about a dozen. His first successful play was the "Rival Queens" (1681), known afterwards as "Alexander the Great," in which occurs the famous line, "When Greek joined Greek then was the tug of war." He collaborated with Dryden in "The Duke of Guise," (1682). Lee became insane in 1684, and was confined in the asylum for five years, hence he was styled "The Mad Poet." He died in a fit of intoxication at London in 1692.

The Best Way.

Traveler—Will I have time to get a drink before the train leaves?

Conductor—Yes, plenty of time.

Traveler—How do I know the train won't leave without me?

Conductor—Well, I'll go along and have a drink with you.